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Crank Up To Bury Saddam

In the first moments of his presidency yesterday Bill Clinton voiced gracious but distinctly measured praise for George Bush. By applauding Bush's half-century of public service and omitting reference to Bush's accomplishments as president, Clinton captured the ambiance that has surrounded the entire transfer of power between the two men: correct, but far from cordial.

Concern in the Clinton camp over Bush's handling of the transition was increased at the last minute by the timing and scope of the pre-inaugural raids against Iraq. For some Clinton confidants, the raids were proof that Bush's outwardly courteous leaving-taking masked a hidden willingness to "rain on the new president's parade."

That may overstate the case. But a string of Bush decisions during the transition have either complicated the opening phase of the Clinton presidency or let pass opportunities to ease the path for the man Bush styled as a "bozo" on the campaign trail.

Bush's committing U.S. troops to Somalia in November without consulting Clinton signaled the correct but uncordial pattern. That pattern prevailed to the end as the White House last week rebuffed quiet overtures from the Clinton team for a joint statement on Haiti. Such a statement might have eased Clinton's task in stepping back from his campaign pledges on Haitian refugees.

"They stiffed the Clinton people, and it was noticed," says a political source with high-level contacts in both camps.

This atmosphere gave rise to understandable last-minute suspicions that Bush may have not put Clinton's interests at the top of his list in waiting so late to launch last week-end's cruise missile strike against Iraq.

Strategically, the extended final strikes against Iraq were too much, too late. In ways dovish critics never could, these strikes underlined the

failure of Bush's post-gulf war strategy toward Iraq and the absence of a meaningful approach by Bush toward regional conflicts after the Cold War.

Saddam Hussein has never ceased to be in violation of significant portions of the United Nations resolutions that brought an end to Operation Desert Storm two years ago. He could have been hit any time, with justice and probably with more effect.

Clinton's behavior is more likely to be affected by these late strikes than is Saddam's. Politically it will now be difficult for the new American president to be any less assertive than Bush in defending the no-fly zones in southern and northern Iraq and the right of U.N. inspectors to enter Iraq.

By design or otherwise, Bush's final days lock Clinton onto a confrontational course with Iraq. There is no great sin in that result, nor in the destruction of a dormant factory that

could have contributed to a new error by Saddam to develop nuclear weapons. Better late than never.

But Clinton inherits a policy that let Saddam remain strong enough to pick the time of confrontations with the United States and the United Nations, to survive those confrontations and then to exploit them politically. The uneasiness Russia and some of America's key Arab partners voiced about the pre-inaugural strikes amount to important gains for Saddam.

Now in office, Clinton should move quickly to stem these gains and to make clear that he will not tolerate other countries dealing with Saddam, as they might have been tempted to do by his verbal lapses in his recent interview with the New York Times.

The evidence the Pentagon has already amassed on the war crimes committed by Saddam and his chief aides in Kuwait and Iraq gives the new president a ready-made vehicle to keep Saddam beyond the international pale.

Bush would never give the green light for a serious effort to have the United Nations brand Saddam a war criminal. Clinton should. He should also authorize Vice President Gore to meet publicly with representatives from the strongest opposition group, the Iraqi National Congress.

Clinton should also launch a new, effective covert destabilization program against Saddam to replace the half-hearted, clumsy one undertaken by the CIA under Bush, and examine the ideas aired last year by Defense Secretary-designate Les Aspin to use force if necessary to set up a U.N. base inside Iraq that would get relief supplies to the Kurds and Shiites.

This would put people first. Bush used periodic threats and a belated burst of military raids at the end of his presidency to defend principles rather than people.

The principles of the U.N. resolutions that ended the gulf war are worth protecting. They should have provided the cornerstone of a new approach to world order. But Bush and his generals, fearful of detracting in any way from the reputation and glory of their 100-hour triumph in the desert, turned blind eye after blind eye to Saddam's infringements and his new crimes at home and then let ethnic cleansing proceed in ex-Yugoslavia.

One last brief season of bombing does not erase Bush's failures in Iraq. Only Bill Clinton, the man Bush treated contemptuously during the campaign and correctly but not cordially in the transition, can bury Bush's mistakes. He can do that by adopting the long-term political strategy that will bury Saddam Hussein.